

MERLINS AS NEST PREDATORS

by

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The hunting tactics of the Merlin (*Falco columbarius*) and its preference for small birds as primary prey are well documented (Rowan 1921–22, Allen and Peterson 1936, Bent 1938, Lack 1971, Page and Whitacre 1975, Brown 1976, Oliphant and McTaggart 1977, Hodson 1978, Newton et al. 1978). Most reports of Merlin prey are based on analyses of nest remains and pellets; few are based on direct observations of hunting birds. I could find no published reports of Merlins taking nestlings directly from the nests of the prey, as has been reported for the closely related American and European Kestrels (*Falco sparverius* and *Falco tinnunculus*) (Tinbergen 1946, Drinkwater 1953, Freer 1973, Windsor and Emlen 1975). Although the occurrence of nestlings in the diet of Merlins has been reported (Armitage 1932, Roberts 1962, Sperber and Sperber 1963), the data were gathered from nest remains, not by direct observations of hunting birds.

During late May and early June 1980 at Big Sky, Gallatin County, Montana, I frequently saw a pair of Merlins on the valley floor (elevation 1990 m) in an area of sagebrush (*Artemisia* sp.) divided by a stream flowing out of nearby mountains, with several beaver ponds and neighboring willows (*Salix* sp.). A golf course was situated amidst these surroundings, with vacation homes and condominiums scattered around the periphery. Many small conifers had been planted on the lawn around these dwellings. On 3 June I noticed a male Merlin seemingly foraging in these conifers—flying from tree to tree. Immediately on landing in a three-meter-high spruce (*Picea* sp.) the Merlin was vigorously attacked by a pair of Robins (*Turdus migratorius*) and flew off carrying an unidentified object in its talons. I searched the tree and found a Robin nest containing two unfeathered living young. I withdrew and watched from about 20 m away.

The Merlin returned in about 30 minutes, flying in low and fast around the corner of a building, and landed in the same tree. The adult Robins resumed their attack and the Merlin turned and defended itself, but shortly flew off again with an object in its talons. A check of the nest revealed a single nestling. I did not see the Merlin again that day, but the next morning the nest was empty.

Further investigation in the vicinity revealed many adult Robins and Robin nests in small conifers, but I could find only a single nest containing one well feathered young and saw only one fledged juvenile. Other small birds, especially Cliff Swallows (*Petrochelidon pyrrhonata*), were common in the area. I once saw a Merlin pursuing a swallow, but it would seem that nestling Robins were easier prey.

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BOOK REVIEW

The Peregrine Falcon. Derek Ratcliffe. 1980. Buteo Books, Vermillion, South Dakota (\$42.50) and T. & A.D. Poyser (£12) 416 pages, 4 color plates 32 bl. and white plates.

Few books have been more eagerly awaited than Derek Ratcliffe's major opus on the Peregrine. It has been well worth waiting for; it is a superb book, by far the best monograph on a bird of prey yet published.

As might be expected Ratcliffe has handled the difficult task with great skill, concentrating almost entirely on the North American/European races: *F. p. pealei*, *anatum*, *tundrius* and *peregrinus*. The remaining races are all briefly described in Chapter 15 at the rear of the book. This means that the text is allowed to flow freely, unhampered by continual reference to the behaviour of other races.

The book opens with a realistic account of man's relationship with the Peregrine, be he egg collector, falconer, pigeon fancier or ornithologist, followed by a discussion on population trends and a detailed summary of the distribution in the British Isles. This is so detailed that one is tempted to try to recognize individual eyries. Information has been gleaned from a wide variety of sources and the author gives generous tribute to all those who made a contribution.

For me the book gained momentum from Page 126 onwards when the subject switches to feeding habits, nesting habitat and the breeding cycle. The spectrum broadens and comparisons are made between the behaviour of *peregrinus* and *pealei*, much of the lat-